Camus: *The Plague*

The Absurd, the concept, as used by Camus, is the apprehension of all experience as having nothing to do with you, your understanding or well-being. Not yours, nor anyone else's.
His brand of existentialism is about what to do in the face of this?

Albert Camus' 1947 novel is having a moment...

We've touched on the science, ethics, and politics of the current pandemic. In addition to being vulnerable organisms and impersonal collectivities, we are humans, sometimes, too. Existentialism is a philosophical orientation that takes this as a starting point. It is intimately concerned with actual human experience, not its reduction to the merely empirically accessible or to some ideal it might conceivably live up to but never does. It starts with the messiness of subjectivity. Lived experience has a quale (a qualitative aspect) to it that is both shareably universal and personally unique. "Existentialists" probably agree on little else but that. Camus denied being an "existentialist," and Kierkegaard was one long before Sartre coined the term but would likely also have rejected the label. *To reject the finality of labels is, in fact, an existentialist trait.* Existentialists don't do dogma, and they don't pretend to objectivity,

and they don't think skepticism, as such, is a very interesting game. There remains what it feels like to exist and be lucid—even condemned to these.

They are keen to the fact that we are self-deceiving creatures, ever subject to bad faith and telling ourselves convenient stories. So much is given. But the claim is not that such tendencies are avoidable. They are not. You may replace one story for another but some story or other you will tell yourself. The existential task is to get a handle on this predicament. It is, for Camus, about struggling for lucidity. Not that you will attain it. Not anymore than Sisyphus will finish his boulder-rolling assignment or that you will ever clean the dust balls out from under your bed once and for all. Life will not finish when you finish what you are doing, but when it finishes, tout court.

Nothing brings this into focus so well as a death threat. Especially one that methodically strips away your reasons for hope. And if, in the end, you still hope, it will be in the face of not having reasons.

That's what *The Plague* is about, and we'll talk about it.

Resources

1. PDF of *The Plague by Albert Camus,* (Stuart Gilbert trans.)
2. Listen to the unabridged audiobook version of the above.
3. Prof. Ruud Welten, podcast lecture on Camus' The Plague.
4. "Responding to a Pandemic: The Myth of Sisyphus," video by *Then & Now*.
5. "Camus in Ten Minutes" video by Eric Dodson.
6. "This Absurd Universe: Albert Camus' The Myth of Sisyphus," graphic video presentation by Marker Ninja Studios.
7. "Why We're Fated To Feel Lost - The Philosophy Of Albert Camus," video.
8. "Camus's Myth of Sisyphus | A History of Philosophy," by *Intellectual Grime*, a nice short contemporary exposition of Camus' absurdist philosophy, video.
9. "On the Absurd | Rebekka Reinhard | TEDxUniHeidelberg," video.
10. *Illness as Metaphor*, (pdf) Susan Sontag. Despite attempts to see it that way, illness is *not* a metaphor, Sontag argues. It may be the only thing that is metaphor-resistant.
11. "Sooner or later we all face death. Will a sense of meaning help us?" Warren Ward. *Aeon*. "Despite all our medical advances,' my friend Jason used to quip, 'the mortality rate has remained constant – one per person.'"
12. Albert Camus - *The Plague (La Peste)* BOOK REVIEW by *Better than Food*.

13. “Eventually, Everyone We Know Now Won’t Be Known By Anyone,” - video by *Pursuit of Wonder*. “A short fictional ‘thought experiment.’ Nearly 2,000 years in the future, a young brother and sister come across an ancient laptop from the early 2000s. On it, they observe the works and happenings of obscure individuals who came before them.”